

# The Sacred, Part I: Losability

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This lecture is an inquiry into sacredness. What is sacred and what is the sacred? What is the relationship between concepts of the sacred and an understanding of the imaginative, poetic frame of the arts?

I have been thinking about these questions ever since I first read Musagetes' Manifesto and encountered these lines:

These are the fundamental attributes of artistic creativity that the Musagetes Foundation believes are capable of transforming modern life and reviving the roots of meaning and belonging:

- It recognizes that something beyond the rational exists; it offers glimpses of the (non-supernatural) sacred.
- It gives spirit a connection outside itself; while it originates in the self, it aims to create work that enters the common space of humanity<sup>1</sup>

Musagetes is a philanthropic entity based in Canada but working internationally to make the arts more central and meaningful in peoples' lives, in our communities and societies. The Manifesto, launched in 2007, sets out the values and beliefs that are the basis for how we understand the arts in relation to society and in relation to how individuals find meaning in experience, artistic and otherwise. The world is vastly poorer for society's diminished recognition of artistic creativity. Instead we have embraced

the narrower concepts of efficiency and rationality that have contributed to the modern crisis, concepts reflected in the prominence of words like objectivity, calculation, measurable, predictable, quantifiable, replicable, efficient, cost-effective, profitable, rational, and linear.<sup>2</sup>

Can a glimpse of the sacred revive the roots of meaning and belonging?

1. Musagetes' *Manifesto*.  
2. *Ibid.*

Recently I was reading Robert Stouck's new biography of Arthur Erickson, the Canadian architect. In a letter to his mother in the mid-50s while travelling in Italy, the youthful Arthur describes his experience of the Christmas Eve Mass at St. Peter's Basilica, a ritual that evolved over centuries from the ancient pagan winter festival of light celebrating the solstice, to an early religious ritual that introduced Christ into the narrative as a way to consolidate political and economic power. Erickson was familiar with this ritual from his omnivorous reading—the pine smell of evergreens, the procession led by a newborn child (originally, Mithra and later, Christ), perfumed sacrifices, and so on. The Christianized ritual at St. Peter's Basilica is described by Erickson as an ecstatic, sacred experience—a poetic flourish gilds his description of the rapturous throngs of worshippers sweeping forward, of the Bernini canopy, the soaring vaults, the scarlet tunics of the Swiss Guards, and the gracefulness of His Holiness. But for young Arthur this wasn't a religious experience—it didn't compel him to beat his breast and confess his sins. Instead, he wrote this:

It was a pageant such as I had never experienced before, an enactment of something as ancient, as inevitable as the dilemma of life and death, of some positioning of the human spirit, some superb reaching of the human imagination.<sup>3</sup>

His insight here is that the sacred—which encompasses all of our humanity from life to death and all of the human spirit in between—resides

in the imagination. And it is in the imagination that we shape the world, not through supernatural intervention.

Human imagination involves a complex mix of sensory perception—taste, touch, smell, sight, and hearing—combined with the relational aspect of metaphor and symbolism, and the experiential aspect of social collaboration that developed with the evolution of the genus *homo* two million years ago.<sup>4</sup> Over the past decade a new area of cognitive science has been studying the imagination as a brain function, proving what philosophers and artists have always thought—that an imaginative act (making art, inventing tools, managing a complex human environment) engages all parts of the brain simultaneously, drawing on memory, analysis, interpretation of symbols and images, emotions, and pain/pleasure receptors. Imagination is the process of making meaning from stimuli and remixing those meanings further to create new significance and interpretation: this continual cycle is the most basic act of human evolution—it is biological, mental, primordial.

Meaning-making is rational and spiritual; it involves reason and the sacred. After the superstitions of a hyper-religious Medieval period, the Enlightenment's great contribution to human thought and development, in its elevation of the individual, was its emphasis on finding a perfect equilibrium between the two manifestations of our imagination: our rationality and our spirituality. Reason compels us to interpret the world for our individual and collective betterment—the

3. Robert Stouck, *Arthur Erickson: An Architect's Life*, Douglas & McIntyre, 2013, 88.

4. Clive Gamble, *Settling the Earth: The Archaeology of Deep Human History*, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

perpetuation of the human species. Spirit—the sacred—tethers us to our origin; it roots us to the cosmos and points to the simple significance of being. The imagination is the place where the sacred resides, the primordial place where we find meaning. It is our oneness with the world, with the air, with plants, with our ancestors, and with our fellow beings.

But then we lose the world. We desacralize our existence. We allow the contemporary over-emphasis on rationalism to diminish the sacred, propelling us on a trajectory of destruction and violence (careless resource extraction, ecological destruction), selfishness (economic individualism, property above people, hyper-consumerism, human exceptionalism), and ethical failures of governance (state and corporate abuses of power). We lose our primordial oneness with the world, detaching ourselves from the whole of existence. The demise of the sacred is the ruin of the imagination, the decline of culture, and the loss of the world. A culture that no longer knows its origins—where its imagination began—is in a state of decay.

Jean-Pierre Dupuy, a French philosopher, documents modernity's processes of desacralization in a book titled *The Mark of the Sacred*. He argues for the primordially of the sacred—finding meaning at the origin of human existence—and calls on humanity to embrace sacredness once again to stave off “the threat to survival and the threat to values.”<sup>5</sup>

These threats, according to Dupuy, are three:

1. the threat of climate change (he cites France's Chief Scientist who says that

humanity has a 50% chance of surviving this century);

2. the threat of an energy crisis and the inevitable violence it will cause (he refers to the post-Hiroshima realization that humanity now has the capacity to destroy itself); and

3. the threat of technological convergence (for an illustration of this threat, read Dave Eggers' 2013 novel *The Circle*.)

If this is what modernity has wreaked, then how do we back away from the precipice? How do we save ourselves from what Jan Zwicky calls the “losability of the world”?<sup>6</sup> The answer that Dupuy gives—one that is echoed by many—is that we have to escape from meaninglessness and return to our origin—to the sacred that resides in our imagination and find again its equilibrium with the rational.

One powerful illustration of the tension between rational and spiritual views of the world is in the contrast between Rene Descartes' rational, thinking mind versus George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's concept of the embodied mind.<sup>7</sup> The Cartesian approach finds meaning only in conscious thought that can be documented, while the embodied mind concept argues that meaning is produced even though most thought is unconscious. Lakoff and Johnson argue that our mind and body are one, giving form to each other. Our sensory perceptions of the world correspond to our unconscious thoughts that shape our understanding of the world; for Lakoff, such understanding or meaning-making is a set of conceptual metaphors that eventually find

5. Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, trans. by M. B. Debevoise, Stanford University Press, 2013, 29.

6. Jan Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, 2nd Edition, Gaspereau Press, 2011, L70.

7. Gamble, 14.

their way into language.<sup>8</sup> Such metaphors—the most basic form of human thought—are also the most fundamental form of human imagination.

In another poetic-philosophical text, *The Primordial Metaphor*, its author Ernesto Grassi muses that the sacred can reveal the primordial metaphor—the first, ‘lost’ word from which all meaning comes forth: “Since this ‘lost’ word eludes us, we trust that the sacred will yet speak to us, perhaps more discretely, more softly, in the echo of a whisper.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, what is the original, sacred metaphor that responds to the pressing need to find the meaning of human existence? For Jean-Pierre Dupuy the sacred metaphor is humanity’s primordial ‘black hole’—the embodiment of algorithmic rationality and imaginative, cosmic poetry.<sup>10</sup>

Guy Davenport points out in *The Geography of the Imagination* that the etymological root of the word ‘culture’ is ‘cultus’—the ancients’ name for the dwelling of a god.<sup>11</sup> The architecture of the *cultus*—product of an evolved imagination—was specific to a place and so, over time, became part of the vernacular ordinariness of daily life. In history, architectural expressions of the *cultus* encompass groves, dolmens, pyramids, temples, cathedrals, and mosques, all of which hold significance in an anthropological study of culture. Davenport based his definition of culture on Oswald Spengler who understood culture as the “formative energy of a people, lasting for thousands of years.”<sup>12</sup> The origin of the culture of a place became synonymous with its imagined shape of sacred dwellings—

hence Erickson’s exclamation that the Papal solstice pageant in the *cultus* of the Vatican was a “superb reaching of the human imagination.” The culture of a society is also shaped by the vernacular ordinariness of its notion of the sacred—a fundamental dynamic; however, when a society’s notion of the sacred is embodied by its Vatican, it can lead to a path of brutal colonialism, violent suppression of difference, exploitation of nature, and subjugation of humanity. But, fortunately for the continuance of humanity, culture is also shaped by the vernacular ordinariness of another expression of the imagination: the arts. Davenport’s response to the question of how we avoid the loss of the world is this: “The imagination is like the drunk man who lost his watch, and must get drunk again to find it. It is as intimate as speech and custom, and to trace its ways we need to reeducate our eyes.”<sup>13</sup> Such reeducation is synonymous with the arts.

Reeducation implies a return to our first education, to the kindergarten of human existence.<sup>14</sup>

To define our first education, let’s look at archaeological and philosophical understandings of human consciousness. I mentioned that our imagination, the center of our production of meaning, is the most basic process and engine of human evolution. But how do we distinguish human consciousness from other forms of animal consciousness while avoiding the moralistic frame of human exceptionalism? What role does imagination play in human consciousness generally? The answer is everything.

8. The concepts of the embodied mind and conceptual metaphors are described in detail in George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, The University of Chicago Press, 1980.

9. Ernesto Grassi, *The Primordial Metaphor*, trans. by Laura Pietropaolo and Manuela Scarci, Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies, Columbia University, 1994, preface.

10. Dupuy, 14-15.

11. Guy Davenport, “The Geography of the Imagination” in *The Guy Davenport Reader*, Counterpoint, 2013, 224.

12. Davenport, 231.

13. Ibid, 225.

14. Musagetes & The J. W. McConnell Foundation, “The Art of Resilience, the Resilience of Art”, July 2013.

An archaeologist of deep human history, Clive Gamble recently published an account of human evolution in the context of our settlement of the earth. One aspect of his methodology is the measurement of brain sizes and shapes from early hominids to hominins to modern *homo sapiens*. Comparing the brain sizes of hominid samples spanning tens of millions of years, Gamble and others established a theory that brain size corresponds to the level of intentionality that the species displays.<sup>15</sup> For example, most animals (brain sizes approx. 400cm<sup>3</sup>) display basic intentionality in that they are self-aware. Hominins (brain sizes approx. 900cm<sup>3</sup>) were self-aware but they also recognized other minds and adjusted their social reasoning accordingly. Humans (and some later hominins), with fully developed frontal cortices and brain sizes approx. 1400cm<sup>3</sup>, evolved the highest level of intentionality that “takes social reasoning to new heights by weaving together the agency of materials and emotions to spin myths and beliefs that owe everything to relational systems of cognition and increasingly little to rational ones.”<sup>16</sup> Gamble’s description of intentionality is one that puts imaginative capacity as the defining element of human consciousness. The spinning of myths through relational systems of cognition—language—is literature: more on that in a moment.

In the archaeology of deep human history, our first education is the moment when consciousness became imaginative, reaching for new heights of knowing. Roberto Mangabeira Unger calls fully intentional consciousness, “the recursive mind”<sup>17</sup>—the expression of variations of thought and

language to “produce the infinite out of the finite.”<sup>18</sup>

The rational is finite, but the sacred is infinite, extending from the primordial moment into the infinity of meaning. And so the imagination opens up new realms of thought and pushes language to new metaphorical significances. Unger points out that the mind is recursive as it understands only in relation to what exists or has existed (similar to Lakoff and Johnson’s concept of the extended, embodied mind)—it’s the imagination that “is the scout of the will, anticipating how we might get to the there—or to different theres—from here.”<sup>19</sup> The ‘theres’ are metaphors.

Our first education, then, is the primordial metaphor; it is mythical, sacred. Our first education is poetry.

Some of the most compelling arguments for why art matters come from the study of literature and reading. The other arts use different sets of symbols and relational factors to produce meaning, but I believe literature in its primary use of language is the most immediate and common to human existence. In a recent seminal book on why we read, Philip Davis elaborated on the ways that intentional thought is formed in our consciousness through the contemplative act of writing and reading literature:

In thinking about human life, [literature] offers as much excess, untidied material as it can by not only thinking but recreating the very objects of thought.... Writers offer this by creating not so much a line of argument as a resonant space for thinking.<sup>20</sup>

15. Gamble, 175.

16. Ibid, 175.

17. Unger, 127.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid, 125.

20. Philip Davis, *Reading and the Reader*, Oxford University Press, 2013, 4.

Contemplation, or resonant thought, is the crown jewel of consciousness; it is the production of infinite meaning—a sacred process that connects the whole of human consciousness from our origin to our most evolved condition, now, in the past, and in all our possible futures. Harry Hay, an American gay activist, understood this. It formed the philosophical core of his Radical Faerie queer movement that began in the 1960s and thrives today. In *Radically Gay*, his definition of ‘spiritual’ stands in for a deep understanding of the infinite sacred:

To me the term ‘spiritual’ represents the accumulation of all experiential consciousness from the division of the first cells in the primeval slime, down through all biological-political-social evolution to your and to my latest insights through Gay Consciousness just a moment ago.<sup>21</sup>

The shaman AA Bronson echoes this in his five *Invocations of the Queer Spirits* with Peter Hobbs in Banff, New Orleans, Governors’ Island, Fire Island, and Winnipeg.<sup>22</sup> The queering of thought extends the unbroken line of Gay Consciousness from the sacred to infinity. Great are the capacities of the imagination to draw poetic lines of meaning that invite all of humanity into sacred, resonant spaces for thinking and being. This is the work of artists.

The artist’s *eros* is for the sacred—a primal longing for home as many Canadian poets (Don McKay, Tim Lilburn) express it. Poetic attention to the world is an erotic quest to reveal the world. It is the pursuit of lines of thought that distinguish the

sacred from the rational—lines drawn through erotic contemplation.

Last year Musagetes invited Rebecca Belmore to develop an artistic project in Sudbury. After her first visit to explore the city, the lakes, the First Nations reserve, and the mines, she became preoccupied with the physical and metaphorical lines that link and divide the vast area of Sudbury. A sentence she jotted down in her notebook became a poetic line that stuck with her for months after that first visit. She called it a “thread to hang onto”.<sup>23</sup> This is what she wrote:

Somewhere between a town, a mine, and a reserve is a line.

The imagined line and the line of poetry are resonant spaces for thinking. What is the nature of the line? How was it drawn? What does it connect or what does it separate? The implications of this line are political, economic, ecological, social, historical.

Over two weeks, Rebecca and her collaborators drew the line in a video work titled *Private Perimeter*. Wearing an orange vest, she marked her presence with an X as if to declare each point along the line a place for contemplation. When I interviewed her after the project, I asked her to reflect on the moment in the film when she is standing in Whitefish Lake:

I decided to walk into the water. The water was so still a reflection was possible. And so, standing in the water, halfway up my shins, I just stood still. I think I stood for about seven minutes. And then everything calmed, calmed

21. Harry Hay, *Radically Gay*, Beacon Press, 1996, 254.

22. AA Bronson and Peter Hobbs, *Queer Spirits*, New York & Winnipeg: Creative Time Books and Plug-In Editions, 2009.

23. Interview with Rebecca Belmore by Shawn Van Sluys, May 16, 2013.

myself. And I could hear all kinds of birds, birdsong. All kinds of birds were doing their thing in the early morning. And it was just really a beautiful moment for myself again, being present, and being quiet and still.

The world is precious and there are moments of stillness but we lose the world. We lose the meaning of our existence. We lose the sacred. Tolstoy lost it for a time. In his autobiographical *Confession* he wrote:

I sort of lived a life and went along and approached the precipice and clearly saw that there was nothing ahead but doom. And I couldn't stop and I couldn't go back and I couldn't close my eyes so as not to see that there was nothing ahead but the delusion of life and happiness and real suffering and real death—complete annihilation.<sup>24</sup>

In his search for meaning, for the dwelling place of the sacred, he recovered it in his imagination, in his literary descriptions of the world—he found it in art. In his novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, his main character, the magistrate, falls against a curtain rod while preparing a new apartment for his ungrateful family, and after a few weeks Ilyich realizes that his injury is terminal. His death-bed anguish gives way in his final hours to a dissipation of fear and death and pain in a manner much like Christ crucified on the cross:

“It is finished!” someone said above him.

He heard these words and repeated them in his heart. “Death is finished,” he said to himself. “It is no more.” He breathed in, stopped halfway, stretched himself, and died.<sup>25</sup>

Tolstoy's anguish was his muse; in *Confession* he was losing the world and to regain it he searched for the sacred. He found it in his imagination, in the literary death of Ivan Ilyich. There is something vastly profound in the primordial nature of our human capacity for imagination—that the sacred therein resides.

The sacred is itself an imagined place. It is where we seek meaning in human existence. Some seek it in a religious notion of the sacred; others in consumption and materialism; in mechanistic and solely rational pursuits of knowledge; or in wealth accumulation and power consolidation. But the only way the drunk man will find his watch is by getting drunk again—by opening his eyes to the losability of the world and imagining possibilities for a better one.

“Death is finished.”

24. Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich & Confession*, trans. Peter Carson, Liveright, 2014, 132.  
25. Ibid.